

Rural poverty in Pakistan

Source: IFAD

Post: 19 June, 2007

Poverty is widespread in Pakistan, and is predominantly a rural phenomenon. Nearly two thirds of the population live in rural areas. Most rural poor people depend on agriculture for their livelihoods. Many have inadequate access to basic services such as safe drinking water, primary health care, education and other social services.

Poverty rates fell in the 1970s and early 1980s but rose again towards the end of the 1990s. According to the Government of Pakistan's poverty reduction strategy paper, currently about 10 per cent of the population is chronically poor, but a much larger part of the population (about 33 per cent) is considered vulnerable and likely to sink into poverty in the event of an external shock such as drought or earthquake.

Who and where are Pakistan's rural poor people?

Despite improvements in economic conditions after recent reforms, there are still broad discrepancies in social standing between men and women. Illiteracy is high among women and girls. In rural areas 22 per cent of girls above 10 have completed primary schooling, compared to 47 per cent of boys. Women own fewer assets, have limited economic options and less access to social services. Yet many play a major role in the household economy and in providing care for their families. Their burden of labour increases significantly when poor agricultural productivity forces men to migrate to find work.

The incidence of poverty varies between rural and urban areas, and from one province to the next. In the many mountainous parts of the country where communities are small, scattered and isolated, and where there are few major urban centers, poverty is widely and evenly distributed. The rugged terrain and fragile ecosystems make cultivation difficult. Lack of access to markets and services has made poverty chronic in these areas.

Why are Pakistan's rural people poor?

Most of the land in Pakistan is arid, semi-arid or rugged, and therefore not easily cultivated. Water resources are scarce throughout most of the country, and providing more remote rural communities with a reliable water supply is difficult.

Because of unequal land distribution, large numbers of rural people live in poverty. A handful of big landholders own a disproportionate amount of land. Most farms are small, measuring less than 5 ha, while 25 per cent of all farms are less than 1 ha in size. About 80 per cent of the farming community is made up of landless laborers. Sharecroppers who work land belonging to large-scale farmers are often in debt to their employers and therefore take a more meager share of the crops.

How severe is the population problem in Pakistan? How can it be resolved?

In Pakistan, the problem of population is very acute, perhaps more than in any other country; the area is fairly extensive, with enough of cultivable land. Vast tracts of land now lying fallow may also be brought under cultivation. Her natural resources are satisfactory, with scopes of further exploitation and development. To add to our woes, the birth rate here is again increasing rapidly. Pakistan has thus not only a misappropriate population but also an ever growing one. To Pakistan, therefore, the solution of the problem is of higher importance than to any other nation of the world.

Practical economists have so far suggested three ways to fight out the population menace. The first consists in the utmost exploitation of resources so as to maximize the production. The second is concerned with planned distribution of national wealth. The third relates to the control of birth so as to keep it within reasonable limit. The same means also apply equally to the problem with which Pakistan is faced. But whether in Pakistan or elsewhere, these are to be applied not separately or isolated but together and simultaneously because they constitute only three fronts of the same strategy. They will, therefore, bear the desired fruit only when they have been put into operation as complementary to one another.